

**Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
February 24, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Developmental Services)**

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Heather Varano and I work at CCARC as a Direct Support Professional. CCARC was founded in 1952 and we provide an array of services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget as I am not able to attend the public hearing.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'd like to ask you to honor the long term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and increase funding this year by an additional \$461 million, or 8% in total for FY23. The increase in this year's budget, while very much appreciated, has quickly been absorbed by rising costs. Over the last year, inflation rose by almost six percent, surpassing the COLA in the current year's budget.

This funding is needed now more than ever. Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities. At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

I work as a Direct Support Professional for Day services at CCARC. We provide activities and programs to help individuals that we support to learn and grow. There is an individual that I have worked with for 14 years. When I first met him, he barely spoke. He now talks all the time. His vocabulary has increased tremendously. This would not be possible without dedicated staff. Staffing is constantly changing. Without staff staying constant, he would not have been able to accomplish this. It is imperative that agencies continue to receive appropriate funding so that we can continue to help our people make progress.

There have been a few raises in the past 2 years. These raises were great, especially for staff who made below that minimum. I have been at staff here for close to 20 years. I did receive a pay increase, but not nearly as much as co-workers who are far less experienced. Please consider this as well when deciding the budget for non-profits such as CCARC. I would hate to see the experienced and dedicated staff leave, due to not receiving appropriate pay increases. This affects staff and the individuals we support.

Nonprofit Providers funded by the Department of Developmental Services are grateful for the efforts of the Appropriations Committee and Governor Lamont to address wage and funding issues specific to services for the Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities population. Last year's Group Home Settlement provided significant funding to increase the minimum wage for direct support staff in DDS agencies.

However, the group home settlement also created significant challenges:

- First, the terms of the settlement provided wage increases of as much as 11.6% for entry level staff, which next year will increase to 14.5%. But the agreement only provides a 3% increase to everyone else. Staff who before July were making only slightly above the new minimum, often people who had years or decades of experience or managing other staff, found themselves suddenly paid almost the same as a new hire.
- Second, the funding dedicated a pool of dollars to enhance employee benefits, but to date none of that funding has been disbursed to providers. We understand it to total less than half what providers have told DDS they would need.

Thank you,
Heather Varano
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